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BETTER HIGH-SCHOOL PLAYS

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Many valuable articles have been contributed to educational literature on the production of the amateur play. Their suggestions are original and stimulating, but in many cases they minimize the most important thing of all—the choosing of the school plays. The kind of play we ask our boys and girls to work on is vastly more important than the way that play is produced. As a matter of fact, the mechanics of stage production are quite simple. A few weeks' study of the rules of stage deportment, exits, turns, and crosses, a sense of order, and, most important of all, a fair amount of ingenuity will be ample equipment for the amateur coach. What she needs most is a warning not to waste her energy, to present only what is worth the presenting, and not to lower the standard of her work by presenting a cheap play.

The farce-comedies which seem to be most popular for high-school production are weak, silly, and utterly trivial. They do not begin to be worth the time and effort put into them. Think of high-school seniors working for weeks on slapstick stuff that it would be a waste of time to read. Think of them memorizing line after line of *The Irishman's Dilemma*, *Box and Cox*, *Mishaps of Mabel*, *A Howling Scream*, and so on indefinitely. They memorize slipshod, ungrammatical sentences when they might be learning lines of beauty and rhythm. There is a directness and vigor in the literary style of a good play that is unequaled in any other branch of literature. It is a fine thing for boys and girls to learn the lines of such a play, but an utter waste of time to learn an inferior play. If we see Johnny reading a dime novel in school, we make him throw it into the wastebasket; but when Johnny gets to be a Senior, we make him work for three weeks on his part in *An Arizona Rose*.

Why? Because we do not stop to consider whether the play is harmful or beneficial. We think of it solely as an entertainment. Usually the chief object in presenting a play is to make money. The class treasurer suddenly discovers a deficit. It must be met, so the class votes to put on a play. Or it may be the athletic association, or the literary society. Every high school mothers some waif of an organization that is always clamoring for money to keep it alive. Or they may start on a campaign to raise money for the class gift. Wherever fifty or a hundred dollars is urgently needed, a class play is a welcome panacea.

We see the high-school play is not put on for art's sake, but for money's sake. The teacher looks for something which will answer the purpose with the least possible effort and expense. She pores over catalogues of dramatic publishing houses, and finally selects a farce-comedy which is warranted to be a sure success for amateurs. She hears they put it on in a nearby town and it made a big hit, so she plunges into it with conviction. What creatures of imitation we all are at heart! You know the rest—the ups and downs of rehearsals, the wholesome fun of working together, the night, and the big success. Everyone is delighted, the young actors are flattered beyond measure, and the newspapers speak extravagantly of the work of pupils, teacher, and school. The school is a few dollars richer, but the boys and girls are considerably poorer for time and energy spent on trash. They have learned silly lines they will not forget for months and perhaps years. This sort of thing may entertain for the moment, but it has no lasting good.

The significant thing is that the students have not the discernment to realize the triviality of what they are working on. They mistake horseplay for humor, and the smart talk of low comedy for clever repartee. Is it any wonder that when they leave high school they will be bored at Mantell's *Richelieu*, and say, "Come on, let's go see a musical comedy"?

We should stop putting on plays solely for dollars and cents. If money must be raised, we can find plenty of other means that will not produce harmful results. When the high school can afford to present a play, let it be a good one—something they can study, and interpret, and mold into a production worth while.

The value of the good play in the high school cannot be over-emphasized. In the first place, it stimulates the appreciation of good literature as nothing else can do. The spoken word thrills and inspires when the written word is passed over superficially. In acting, every line is significant, and the exact meaning of every word must be brought out. The sentence is a vital thing, and the actors must not only be sure that they understand and appreciate it, but they must try to make their audience understand and appreciate it also. Only occasionally will high-school boys have dramatic art to accomplish so much, but almost all will gain the appreciation themselves.

He cannot fail to note the clarity and directness of style in plays. The dramatist never leaves a muddled sentence. He has no time to waste in confusing his audience. They have to get the point, and get it by hearing it just once, for they cannot order it repeated, nor can they complacently turn back a leaf and read the sentence over. Then, too, he has a chance to study first hand the subtle, charming, and elusive thing we call humor. The dramatic teacher will bring out all kinds in the play; as the French analyze it, the humor of situation, of character, and of repartee. In the play, humor is produced as scientifically as sodium chloride is in the laboratory.

Further, he will study characterization. He will observe how a trait of character is suggested by words and action. Study of plays is quite superior to that of novels in this respect. When he reads a book he sees characters in his mind, but when he acts the character he *is* the character. He voices the character's thoughts and interprets his moods. Any boy who has acted the part of Petruchio will know how it *feels* to swagger around and knock over tables. He will know the character more thoroughly than if he spent a month studying it from the written page. And this analysis of people, this acquaintance with human nature, is the greatest study in the world. If we could teach that, many of our educational problems would be solved.

All this is lost with the cheap play. It would be senseless to take it seriously, because it is cheap. The amateurs simply learn lines. They cannot study it because there is nothing to study.

Secondly, the good play brings out personality. In assuming a rôle, the boy or girl forgets himself for the time and has to put on the temperament of a different character. He lets himself be broadened and strengthened for the part he is taking. In this way his sympathies are deepened and he gains a sensitiveness and response to things that will make his personality strong. He loses timidity, the sign of self-consciousness. In this respect, dramatic work does a vast amount of good to the class we teachers know well as the quiet, bright type—students who are naturally brilliant in intellect but reticent in manner. Such persons need to study self-expression. The type is much more common among girls than boys, and it is truly a problem to know how to bring it out. Athletics and the social life in the high school do a great deal for such girls, but we have found that parts in plays did more for our quiet girls than any other thing we have tried.

A distinction should be noted here between the kind of work we give to boys and that we give to girls. Boys like plenty of action and characters they can draw in broad lines. Girls do better on quiet, more subtle scenes, and they like to work out little details in character. Another thing we have found by experimenting is that pupils get most good out of the play by taking parts which are not directly suited to them. For instance, instead of giving our quiet little girl the part of a demure maid, we assigned her the rôle of an active, garrulous old spinster. After practice she did surprisingly well and it gave her a great amount of confidence in herself. The maid fell to the lot of an overexuberant girl, and it was a surprise to see how attractive she was in a subdued state. It is a great temptation to give them parts that we know they can do well instead of parts that will do them most good. Avoid it.

In urging the presentation of better plays, I have followed objections with interest. Invariably they hinge on the difficulty of the work (a bugbear to the inexperienced teacher) or the expense. So many teachers are afraid to put on a good play because it seems too pretentious a task. This is a delusion. From experience it is safe to say that standard comedies can be given more satisfactorily than plays of a lower class because there is more to them in plot and character to hold the interest of the audience. Crudities that

ONE HUNDRED STANDARD PLAYS

NOTE.—The plays are listed in this way so that the teacher can determine at a glance the difficulty and expense of presentation. As far as possible the most practicable and most representative play has been chosen from each dramatist. All are comedies, most of them comedies of manners or farcical comedies, unless otherwise stated. Synopses of the plays can be found in the catalogues of the larger dramatic publishing houses in New York, Boston, or Chicago. They can verify these figures or furnish any further information desired.

DRAMATIST	PLAY	CHARACTERS		COSTUMES	ROYALTY
		Male	Female		
Anonymous.	Robin Hood Plays*			Old English	0
Augier, Emil.	<i>The Post Scriptum</i> (short).	1	2	Simple	0
Bangs, J. K.	<i>A Proposal under Difficulties</i> (short).	2	2	Modern	0
Barker, Granville, and Housman, Laurence.	<i>Prunella</i> .	12	10	Simple	\$50
	<i>The Professor's Love Story</i> .	7	5	Period	50
Barrie, J. M.	<i>Quality Street</i> .	7	6	Simple	50
	<i>Rosalind</i> (short).	1	2	Modern	50
	<i>A Business Meeting</i> (short).			Modern	0
Bates, Arlo.	<i>A Gentle Jury</i> (short).	1	12	Modern	0
Benedix.	<i>The Lawsuit</i> (short).	5		Modern	0
Boucicault, Dion.	<i>London Assurance</i> .	10	3	Period	0
	<i>The Shaughran</i> , manuscript only.			Irish	25
Byron, H.	<i>Our Boys</i> .	6	4	Modern	0
Caillavet, G. A. de.	<i>Choosing a Career</i> (short).			Modern	0
Capus.	<i>Brignol and His Daughter</i> (short).	5	4	Modern	0
Copee, François.	<i>The Violin Maker of Cremona</i> (pathetic); (short).	3	1	Period	0
Daly, Augustin.	<i>Seven Twenty-Eight</i> .	6	4	Modern	25
Davies.	<i>Cousin Kate</i> .	3	4	Modern	50
	<i>Lady Epping's Lawsuit</i> .	12	7	Modern	50
	<i>Miss Civilization</i> (short).	4	4	Modern	Permission of Collier's
Davis, R. H.	<i>The Dictator</i> .	14	3	Modern	\$50
	<i>The Galloper</i> (difficult).	17	4	Modern	50

D'Ennery and Cormon	<i>A Celebrated Case</i> (melodrama)	8	5	Period	0
Doran, Marie	<i>Tempest and Sunshine</i>	5	3	Modern	\$10
Fitch, Clyde	<i>Nathan Hale</i> (serious)	9	4	Period	10
	<i>Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines</i>	14	13	Modern	50
	<i>Secret Service</i>	14	5	Civil War	25
Gillette, Wm.	<i>Too Much Johnson</i>	10	3	Modern	25
	<i>All the Comforts of Home</i>	7	6	Modern	25
	<i>She Sloops to Conquer</i>	15	4	Period	0
Goldsmith, O.	<i>The Good-natured Man</i>	11	5	Period	0
Gregory, Lady	Seven One-Act Plays				5
Grundy, Sydney	<i>A Pair of Spectacles</i>	8	3	Modern	10
	<i>Arabian Nights</i>	4	5	Modern	0
Hawtrev, C.	<i>The Private Secretary</i>	0	4	Modern	25
Hertz, Hedrich	<i>King René's Daughter</i> * (short)	6	2	Simple	0
Holbrook, Richard, <i>Trans.</i>	<i>Pierre Patelin</i> (short)	4	1	Simple	0
Hope, Anthony	<i>Adventure of Lady Ursula</i>	12	3	Period	25
Houghton, Stanley	<i>The Younger Generation</i>	7	4	Modern	25
	<i>Independent Means</i>	3	3	Modern	25
Howells, W. D.	Farces				0
Jerome, Jerome K.	<i>Miss Hobbs</i>	5	4	Modern	25
Jones, Henry A.	<i>Maneuvers of Jane</i>	9	11	Simple	50
Jonson, Ben.	<i>The Sad Shepherd</i> * (romantic poetic comedy)	15	6	Period	0
	<i>His Master's Rival</i>	4	3	Period	0
Labiche and Martin	<i>Voyage of Monsieur Perrichon</i>	10	2	Modern	0
	<i>Hiwatha</i> *	10	2	Indian	0
Longfellow, H. W.	<i>Courtship of Miles Standish</i>	2	2	Period	0
McFadden, Elizabeth	<i>Why the Chimes Rang</i> (short); (Christmas play— number varies)	5	5	Simple	10
	<i>Dr. Wake's Patient</i>	10	7	Modern	25
Mackey and Ord	<i>The House Next Door</i>	5	4	Modern	10
Manners, J. H.	<i>Peg O' My Heart</i> (manuscript only)				
Mapes, Victor	<i>Flower of the Yeddo</i> (in verse, short)	1	3	Simple	5
Mason, A. E.	<i>Green Stockings</i>	7	5	Modern	25
Mellhac and Halévy	<i>Indian Summer</i> (number varies)	2	2	Simple	0

* Starred plays are suitable for out-of-door performance.

ONE HUNDRED STANDARD PLAYS—Continued

DRAMATIST	PLAY	CHARACTERS		COSTUMES	ROYALTY
		Male	Female		
Merrington, M.	<i>Captain Lettarblair</i>	8	3	Modern	\$25
Milton.....	<i>Comus</i> * (a masque); (number varies).....	9	Simple	0
	<i>The Merchant Gentleman</i>	11	4	Period	0
Molière.....	<i>The Doctor in Spite of Himself</i>	6	3	Period	0
	<i>The Affected Young Ladies</i>	6	3	Period	0
Nichols and Lestocq.....	<i>Jane</i>	5	4	Modern	50
Nirdlinger.....	<i>The First Lady in the Land</i>	11	8	Period	25
	<i>Washington's First Defeat</i> (short).....	1	2	Period	0
Pailleron, E.....	<i>The Art of Being Bored</i>	11	9	Period	0
Parker, Louis N.....	<i>Rosemary</i>	6	4	Modern	Manuscript
Pinero, A. W.....	<i>Dandy Dick</i>	7	4	Modern	\$10
	<i>The Magistrate</i>	12	4	Modern	10
Pryce and Fens.....	<i>'Op-O'-Me-Thumb</i> (serious, short).....	1	5	Modern	10
	<i>Castle</i>	4	3	Modern	0
Robertson, T. W.....	<i>David Garrick</i>	8	3	Period	0
Rostand, E.....	<i>The Romançers</i> *.....	5	1	Fanciful	0
Ryly, Madeline.....	<i>Mice and Men</i>	7	5	Period	50
	<i>A Scrap of Paper</i>	6	6	Modern	0
Sardou.....	<i>The Black Pearl</i>	7	3	Modern	0
Schiller (trans. Abbott).....	<i>Nephew or Uncle</i>	8	3	Modern	0
Schönthan, von.....	<i>A Kettle of Fish</i> (same as Daly's 7-20-8).....	6	4	Modern	0
	<i>Taming of the Shrew</i>	15	3	Period	0
	<i>Much Ado about Nothing</i>	8	3	Period	0
	<i>As You Like It</i>	13	4	Period	0
Shakespeare.....	<i>Merry Wives of Windsor</i>	16	4	Period	0
	<i>Comedy of Errors</i>	13	4	Period	0
	<i>Midsummer-Night's Dream</i> *.....	13	10	Simple	0
	<i>Twelfth Night</i>	10	3	Period	0
Shaw, Bernard.....	<i>How He Lied to Her Husband</i> (short).....	7	1	Modern	50
Sheridan, R.....	<i>The Rivals</i>	9	5	Period	0

Shipman, L. E.	<i>D'Arcy of the Guards</i>	14	3	Period	\$25
Sophocles	<i>Antigone</i> (serious)	5	3	Greek	0
Tarkington, B., and Free- man	<i>Monsieur Beaucaire</i>	14	7	Period	10
Tarkington, B., and Wilson	<i>The Man from Home</i>	10	3	Modern	50
Taylor, Tom.	<i>Still Waters Run Deep</i> ..	9	2	Period	0
Tchekhof, Anton.	<i>A Marriage Proposal</i>	2	1	Russian	0
Tennyson, A.	<i>The Princess</i> *	8	4	Fanciful	0
Terence	<i>Phormio</i>	11	2	Roman	0
	Latin Plays (University of Chicago)				0
Thomas, Brandon.	<i>(The Highland Legacy</i> (short)	5	2	Modern	5
Udall, Nicholas.	<i>(Charley's Aunt</i> (manuscript)	6	4		25
Warren, M. J.	<i>Roister Doister</i> (in representative English comedies) ..	9	4	Simple	0
Wilde, Oscar.	<i>A Twig of Thorn</i>	6	7	Simple	0
Yeats, W. B.	<i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i>	5	4	Modern	50
	<i>The Land of Heart's Desire</i> (short)	3	3	Simple	0

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mark amateur work can be more easily overlooked in them than in a low farce. One year in our high school we experimented on a great variety of plays, ranging from Shakespeare to low comedy. Without exception the play which gained best response was an adaptation of the *Taming of the Shrew*, and the other plays were successful according to their actual value.

The presenting of the better play can run as smoothly and simply as any other. As a rule, the simpler the stage settings are, the more effective they are. We obtained most artistic results by using settings formed by dark green burlap screens hinged together. For interior settings we decorated the screens conventionally to suggest the paneled walls of a room, and pinned on paper pictures and hangings. We adapted plain mission furniture for interior scenes and rustic seats for exterior. Almost any kind of a setting can be built up in this way. If it is too difficult to present, suggest it. Thus a flower garden can be suggested (as in the Japanese theaters) by a conventional design of paper blossoms pinned on the screens. In stage art symbolic settings have long been recognized as the most effective thing, and they are much more satisfactory for amateur work than worn-out, tawdry, painted scenery.

The dramatic advantage of simplicity is this: while it may not directly attract, it does not detract, as painted scenery is likely to do. The attention is focused on the characters on the stage, and the setting becomes what it should be—merely a framework.

This other objection is the one which causes much practical difficulty. The school taboos any unnecessary expense. There are a number of highly desirable plays which demand neither royalty nor costuming, but it must be admitted that these are few. If the play is recent, it is more than likely that a royalty of from ten to fifty dollars is demanded; and if the play is classic, it is more than likely that it requires special costuming. But if the play is not put on to raise money, surely the performances would net enough to cover expenses. If this is found impossible, restrict your choice to the simpler classic plays.

The best catalogue any teacher can have is her own memory, her knowledge of plays she has seen and studied, and her ability to adapt these. The Drama League has published a selective list

of plays for amateurs which is by far better than anything collected heretofore, but even this list contains many plays far from creditable, and the teacher must use careful discrimination. There are many catalogues issued by publishing houses, but we must remember these are prepared for a wide amateur circle, and they leave the wheat with the tares. It is for the high school to use only the best. There are plenty of good plays. We are the heirs of six centuries of English dramatists. Only they will not come tabulated to us. We must use observation and initiative in seeking them out.

A few weeks ago I received a letter asking for some suggestions for a play. It read: "Tell me a good play to put on—something real funny. This town doesn't like any highbrow stuff." That letter was amusing. It presupposes that nothing classic is funny, which is an error, and, further, that the average audience does not like good things, which is a worse error. They may not have had the advantage of seeing standard plays, but that is no reason that they would not like them if they were creditably presented at a reasonable price. As a matter of fact, the audience is very loath to go back to the lower standard when once they have been given something worth while. Years ago Walter Pater was deeply incensed at this belittling of popular appreciation, and he wrote to his fellow-writers, "Do not presume upon the willing intelligence of the reader." His advice was wise. We might say, "Do not presume upon the willing intelligence of your audience." They will understand and appreciate more than you give them credit for. Too often we mistake their applause for approval. I have seen an audience applaud honestly at a cheap performance because it amused them for the moment and complain the next day, when they thought it over seriously, because the schools were not working on something worth while.

They really want the best. So let us give it to them, as far as we can. After all, art was born for the great public and not solely for the cultured few.